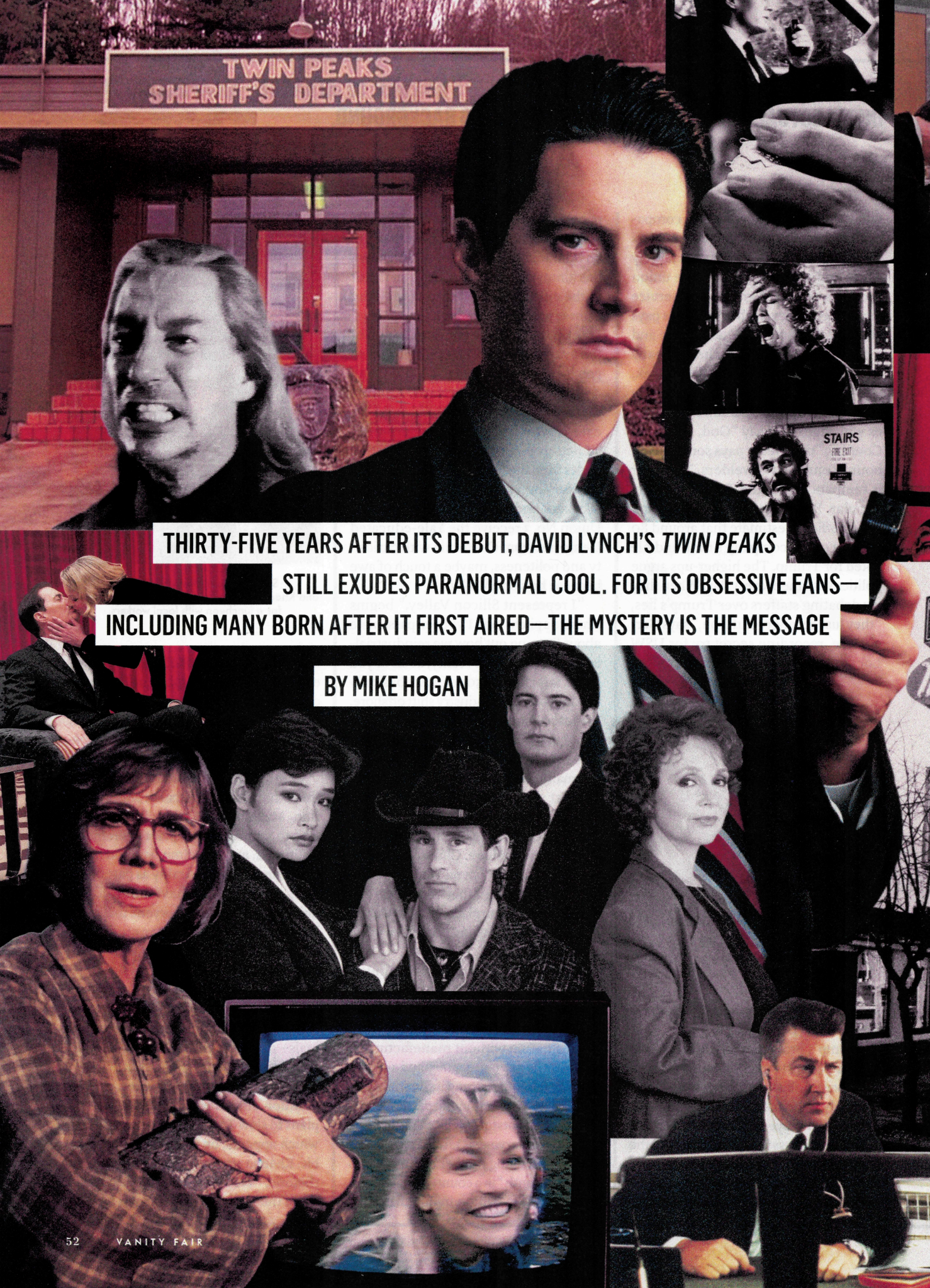
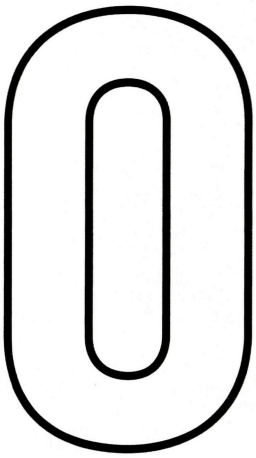


THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER ITS DEBUT, DAVID LYNCH'S *TWIN PEAKS* STILL EXUDES PARANORMAL COOL. FOR ITS OBSESSIVE FANS—INCLUDING MANY BORN AFTER IT FIRST AIRED—THE MYSTERY IS THE MESSAGE

BY MIKE HOGAN

PEAK TV



ON THE MORNING of January 16, Kyle MacLachlan was working out in his home gym high in the hills above Los Angeles when his wife came to the door and said, "I have some terrible news." David Lynch, the director who discovered MacLachlan and made him a star, was dead. "I didn't collapse," MacLachlan says, "but everything went right out of me."

Everyone knew Lynch was battling emphysema, but MacLachlan didn't think he was dying. Just a few weeks earlier, he and Laura Dern had visited Lynch at his house down the road. "We always kept a distance because he didn't want to catch anything—his lungs were so fragile. But he was chipper, and we were talking about the next thing we might want to do and trying to figure out how he could direct from a remote location."

In 1983 Lynch plucked MacLachlan from obscurity and cast him as Paul Atreides in *Dune*. After it bombed, Lynch stunned MacLachlan by casting him again, in *Blue Velvet*. Then came his role as Agent Dale Cooper in *Twin Peaks,* the TV series that Lynch cocreated with writer Mark Frost. MacLachlan knows that's the one he'll always be remembered for. Even Lynch tended to conflate him with his character. "Whether it was Kyle or Coop, sometimes it was blurry," MacLachlan says.

Not that he minded. They were friends and colleagues both off-screen and on. Lynch cast himself in the show as FBI deputy director Gordon Cole, Coop's boss and secret sharer. "*Twin Peaks* in David's mind was a living, breathing thing," MacLachlan says. "And I think part of why he enjoyed being Gordon Cole was he could actually enter that world."

Lynch may be gone, but the world of *Twin Peaks* lives on. The show premiered on April 8, 1990, and immediately rewrote the rules of TV. For mainstream viewers, it was a clever evening soap with a riveting murder mystery. For those with artier tastes, it was a revelation. Its quirky characters and bizarre twists marked a turn from the glossy maximalism of the '80s to the eccentric detachment of a new decade whose zeitgeist it helped define. Everything about *Twin Peaks* was cool: the tone, the dialogue, the music, even the setting, just a short drive from the spot where grunge was about to erupt. "This is kind of a simplistic understatement," says *Lost* cocreator Damon Lindelof, "but it had a vibe."

The series commanded public mindshare at a scale no longer imaginable for a network drama. People flocked to *Twin Peaks* viewing parties. Supermarket bakeries churned out cherry pies on Thursday nights. And everyone wanted to know who killed the beautiful but tormented homecoming queen Laura Palmer. The show's young stars became offbeat sex symbols overnight. "Its popularity was surprising to all of us," says Mädchen Amick, who was just 18 when she first played Shelly Johnson. "It was just this fervor of fandom. I appreciated the enthusiasm, but it was very, very hard to navigate, being so new in the industry."

Then, just as suddenly, the show flamed out. In barely more than a year, ABC shut it down. According to *The New York Times,* the normies had grown frustrated by the show's refusal to solve its central mystery, while the "Lynchians" were grossed out by its popularity. A year later, Lynch's film spin-off, *Fire Walk With Me,* flopped. And that, it seemed, was (red) curtains for *Twin Peaks.*

Except it wasn't. Fans tried to save *Twin Peaks* from cancellation, flooding ABC Entertainment chief Robert Iger's office with firewood in honor of the show's famous Log Lady, who carries around a hunk of Douglas fir that transmits messages from another dimension. And fans have kept the phenomenon alive for decades now, all but manifesting a 2017 sequel series on Showtime. "The fans began the drumbeat, and David and Mark got back together," says MacLachlan.

Twin Peaks fans overindex among TV writers, who have smuggled its sensibility and paranormal intrigue into everything from *The X-Files* and *Lost* to *Stranger Things.* "Probably 99.99 percent of the work that I've done since then is rooted in the filmmakers being fans of *Twin Peaks* and of David Lynch," says Amick, who went on to star in *Riverdale.* Today's *Severance* obsessives trading wild theories on Reddit are the heirs of the early adopters who dissected *Twin Peaks* on Usenet.

About a year ago I found myself compulsively rewatching the entire 53-hour *Twin Peaks* filmography—the first two seasons, the film *Fire Walk With Me,* the outtakes collection *The Missing Pieces,* and the Showtime sequel series *Twin Peaks: The Return.* Because I wasn't worried about spoilers, I googled everything that confused me, which was a lot. I discovered a surprisingly active community of fans sharing theories, explanations, and annotations, not only on Reddit,

---

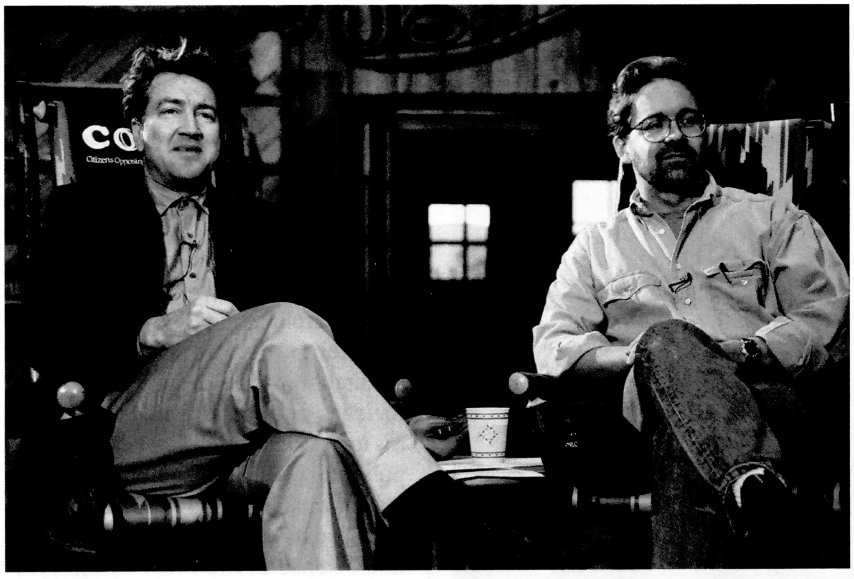
TRY THAT IN A SMALL TOWN
The *Twin Peaks* phenomenon was such that it made icons out of some unlikely people, places, and things. Pictured on the previous spread: Laura Palmer's homecoming photo; Agent Dale Cooper and his trusty microcassette recorder; the Log Lady and her beloved piece of Douglas fir; the Giant with his bow tie and the Man From Another Place in the Red Room; Sherilyn Fenn's vertiginously peaked eyebrows, and many more.

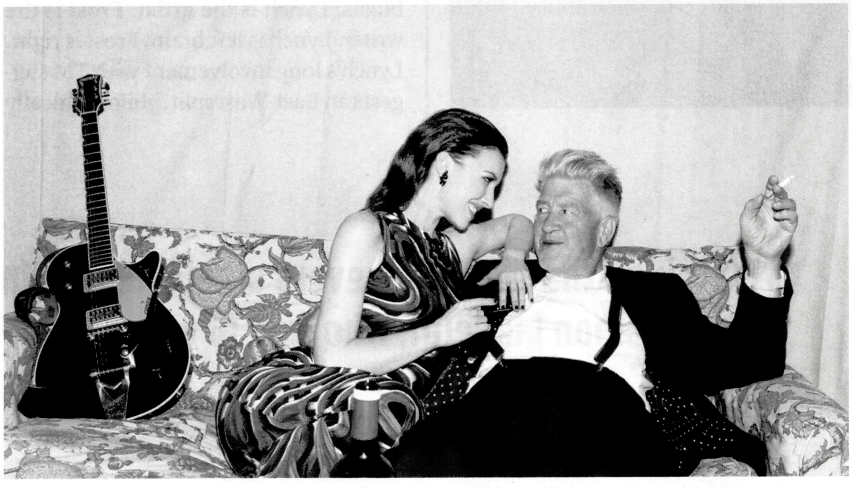
LYNCH AND FROST: JEFF KRAVITZ/FILMMAGIC. LYNCH AND CHRYSTABELL: ELIAS TAHAN. PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO COLLAGE BY PAMELA WANG. SHERIFF, AUTOPSY, MACLACHLAN, CAST, LAURA ON TV, COLLAGE, CAFE, AMICK: ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES/DISNEY GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT/GETTY IMAGES. ALL REMAINING PHOTOS: ABC/EVERETT COLLECTION.

Discord, and YouTube but in fanzines and books. Some had deeply unrealistic ideas of how TV shows are made, and a lot of their notions were patently absurd. But I came much closer to unlocking the show's mysteries with their help than I ever could have without it. They were, as the old Zen saying goes, fingers pointing at the moon. The goal is to find the moon, not the fingers. Or, as Lynch famously said, "Keep your eye on the doughnut and not on the hole!"

I don't think *Twin Peaks* can be fully understood without the fans. It's as if, by leaving so much unresolved, Lynch and Frost made room for them. They created a vacuum, which their enthusiasts have filled with ideas, art, and a sense of community whose dynamics aren't so different from those of a classic American small town.

The more *Twin Peaks* I consumed, the more I felt that its true meaning was just beyond my grasp. There were clues and references everywhere I looked: to Vedic scriptures and theosophical precepts, yes, but also to old movies and pulp magazines. The rational part of me knew there was no ultimate secret to unseal. It's just a TV show! But I kept digging anyway. *What does* Twin Peaks *mean*? This was the question that haunted me. To answer it, I began to research how the show was made. But I also studied the people who have kept it alive.





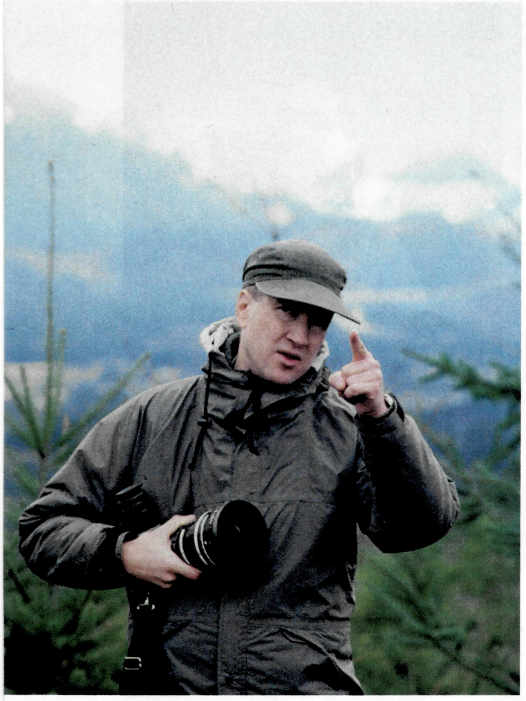
"We just went for it," says Mark Frost, who told Lynch, "Let's ride this for as long and as hard as we can, because we'll never get a chance like this again."

"WE WERE 100 PERCENT ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH"

MARK FROST WAS living in Minneapolis in 1979 when he caught a midnight screening of Lynch's experimental breakthrough feature, *Eraserhead*. "It blew my mind," Frost remembers, "and I walked out of there with the conviction that he and I would work together someday." At just 26, Frost had already had a brief but promising run as a television writer in Hollywood. A child of theater people, he'd moved back to Minneapolis to focus on writing plays but soon tired of freezing through the winter on a playwright's budget. In 1981 he accepted an invitation from a mentor, Steven Bochco, to join the *Hill Street Blues* writers room.

A police procedural set in an unnamed city, *Hill Street Blues* lit the fuse for the coming explosion of prestige dramas. Its complex characters and multiepisode story arcs felt revolutionary in a *Dukes of Hazzard* era. Frost joined for the third season. Among the writers was David Milch, who would go on to create *Deadwood* for HBO. *Hill Street Blues*, Frost later said, was his "postgraduate degree in making a television show." So he was ready when his agent, Tony Krantz, introduced him to Lynch.

From top: David Lynch with *Twin Peaks* cocreator Mark Frost in Culver City, California, in 1990; Lynch with Chrystabell, his longtime musical collaborator and *Twin Peaks: The Return* costar, in Los Angeles in 2012.



So began a game-changing collaboration. (The drama would come later.) A capacious reader with a taste for eccentric topics—conspiracy theories, occult religions, UFOs—Frost was a ride-or-die liberal Democrat whose great-uncle had worked for FDR. Lynch had an itinerant childhood owing to his dad's job as a USDA research scientist and spent time in Montana, Idaho, Washington State, North Carolina, and Virginia. Trained as a painter and devoted to Transcendental Meditation, he was always on the lookout for ideas, often images bubbling up from his unconscious. On set, he tried to be present in the moment and take advantage of what he called happy accidents.

There have been many attempts to make sense of the Frost-Lynch symbiosis: Lynch is the artist, Frost is the writer. Lynch is left brain, Frost is right. Lynch's long involvement with TM suggests an East-West split, philosophically speaking, but in fact Frost is well-versed in all forms of spirituality. His fluency in theosophism, a 19th-century effort to bring all the world's mythologies together under a single "scientific" system, certainly came in handy as he set about trying to translate Lynch's freaky flashes of inspiration into lore worthy of Tolkien or Lucas.

Krantz suggested that Frost and Lynch adapt *Goddess,* a book by Anthony Summers about Marilyn Monroe's secret trysts with JFK and RFK. The project died, but the two men stayed in touch. "We were 100 percent on the same wavelength," Lynch later said. "We were laughing and writing and laughing and writing." They wrote a bizarre comic screenplay called *One Saliva Bubble,* then worked up an even weirder treatment called *The Lemurians,* about a secret race of seven-foot-tall, egg-laying humanoids. Sadly, both fell through.

In 1986, *Blue Velvet,* Lynch's film about a clean-cut young man's descent into the criminal underworld, became an art house smash. People were starting to use the term "Lynchian" to describe an all-American milieu with a dark underbelly. That's when Lynch and Frost pitched ABC on a show about a small town with secrets, where nothing is as it seems. The executives were a little afraid of Lynch, but Frost seemed sane. And the hybrid of evening soap opera and detective mystery they sketched was appealing.

Every once in a while, someone in Hollywood falls so far behind the competition that they decide they might as well try something different. So ABC, trailing NBC and CBS badly, greenlit Frost and Lynch's weird thing. "We just went for it," Frost remembers. "And having the television experience that David did not have, I simply said, 'Let's ride this for as long and as hard as we can, because we'll never get a chance like this again.'" The two cocreators would own the series itself—a detail that would help shape its future.

"Watching that TV show, every single neuron in my brain fired," says Damon Lindelof, who was 16 when *Twin Peaks* first aired.

From top: Lynch during production of the *Twin Peaks* pilot episode; Laura Dern's Diane confronts Mr. C, Cooper's evil doppelgänger, in *The Return;* Kyle MacLachlan and Sheryl Lee at the front door of Mary Reber's house in the final episode of *The Return.*

Lynch didn't ask actors to read from a script. Instead, he sat with them and had a conversation. He trusted his intuition. Harry Goaz, who plays the openhearted cop Deputy Andy, was Lynch's driver. Frank Silva, who plays the evil entity Bob, was a set dresser. Lynch got the idea to use him after overhearing someone on set warn Silva not to lock himself inside a room. "In my head I see Frank locked in Laura Palmer's room and I just had a feeling," Lynch says in the 2018 book *Room to Dream.* "And that's just the way ideas come. Where do they come from? They're all gifts."

Lynch, then 43, directed the two-hour pilot in early 1989. It was a feature film,

effectively, shot on location in Washington's Snoqualmie Valley, 30 miles east of Seattle. The cast was a mix of industry vets and newcomers. None knew what to expect from this unusual project.

In the opening moments of the pilot, Pete Martell—played by *Eraserhead* star Jack Nance—discovers Laura Palmer's body on the beach under a giant log. "She's dead, wrapped in plastic," he tells Sheriff Harry S. Truman on the phone. As the episode unfolds, we encounter one suspicious local after another. Everyone seems to have something to hide and some reason to want Laura dead. We also meet Cooper, the ostensible star of the show. A friendly FBI agent with a taste for cherry pie and a rare willingness to plumb his own unconscious for clues, he is an avatar of Lynch himself. But he also represents us, the audience. We want to know who killed Palmer, and it's his job to find out.

ABC's executives were unsure about the pilot until test audiences started flipping for it. "I was in a rotisserie baseball league with Mark, and he said, 'Come see this pilot I made with David Lynch,'" recalls Harley Peyton, who went on to write for the show. "I congratulated him afterwards and said, 'I've never really written for television, but if you need anyone to come and help write a script...'"

The network gave *Twin Peaks* a slot as a mid-season replacement. The pilot's Snoqualmie Valley locations were hastily approximated in and around Los Angeles. Frost took charge of the production and wrote the short season's finale himself, stuffing it full of cliff-hangers to maximize their chances of getting renewed.

"A WIZARD PROGRAMMER"

A DECADE EARLIER, CBS had run a wildly successful advertising campaign for its evening soap *Dallas* with the tagline "Who Shot J.R.?" Now ABC put its marketing muscle behind the question "Who Killed Laura Palmer?" It worked, and millions of Americans were soon demanding an answer. Some fans dialed in to the show's more eccentric frequencies too. Damon Lindelof, then 16, was one of them. He and his dad were big *Eraserhead* fans. When they found out Lynch was doing a TV show, they eagerly tuned in. "Watching that TV show, every single neuron in my brain fired," Lindelof remembers. His father recorded each episode on VHS. "When it was over," he says, "we would immediately watch it again, fast-forwarding through the commercials, to analyze all the clues."

By 1990, just about every home in America had a VCR. Only a few had a modem. But for technologically savvy fans, having the power to rewatch an episode, freeze frames of special interest, and then share your observations in real time was a thrilling development. In a 1995 paper analyzing the Usenet newsgroup alt.tv.twinpeaks, MIT literature professor Henry Jenkins quoted one fan as saying, "Can you imagine *Twin Peaks* coming out before VCRs or without the net? It would have been Hell!"

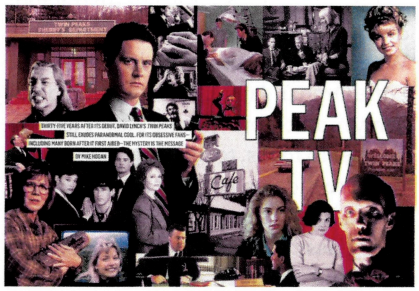
The mostly male fans who frequented alt.tv.twinpeaks had a discernible set of preoccupations. Jenkins noted "their fixation on resolving narrative enigmas," "their complex relationship to Lynch as author," and "their perceptions of themselves as sophisticated television viewers." They had a "hacker" mentality, Jenkins observed, and created a mental model of Lynch in their own image. "Lynch's authorial identity emerged in the net discourse as both that of a wizard programmer," he wrote, "and that of a trickster who consistently anticipates and undermines audience expectations."

The fans trading theories on Reddit, Discord, and YouTube today aren't so different from their Usenet predecessors. If anything, the sprawling and open-ended *Twin Peaks: The Return* supercharged the theory economy among fans and bolstered the impression of Lynch, who directed all 18 hours, as an all-knowing auteur imbuing every frame with arcane meaning. Lynch and Frost, for their part, have always steadfastly refused to say what deeper meaning, if any, the show might have. "David and I began with an agreement that we both advocated for," says Frost, "which is just write it and make it and don't explain it and let people reach their own conclusions."

The most successful exercise in fan theorizing to date is also the most controversial. In 2019 a 33-year-old YouTuber named Ross Ribblett posted a video titled "Twin Peaks ACTUALLY EXPLAINED (No, Really)." Over the course of four and a half hours (yes, *hours*), he lays out his case that CONTINUED ON PAGE 86

From top: shooting the discovery of Laura Palmer's body on the beach; MacLachlan and Michael Ontkean (Sheriff Harry S. Truman) shooting a scene at the train car where Laura was killed; Lee as Laura's cousin Maddy Ferguson, Lara Flynn Boyle as Donna Hayward, and James Marshall as biker-with-a-heart-of-gold James Hurley; Adele Jones and Chrystabell at a Comic-Con International fan event in 2018.

BEACH SCENE: PAUL DUNCAN. RAILROAD, TABLE SCENES: ABC PHOTO ARCHIVES/DISNEY GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT/GETTY IMAGES. CONVENTION: PAUL BUTTERFIELD/GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE, LYNCH: WALT DISNEY TELEVISION PHOTO ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES. DERN, MACLACHLAN: PATRICK WYMORE/SHOWTIME/EVERETT COLLECTION. MACLACHLAN, LEE: SUZANNE TENNER/SHOWTIME/EVERETT COLLECTION.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 57 Lynch's goal with *Twin Peaks* was to use the unsolved mystery of Laura Palmer to counter the desensitizing effects of mainstream TV, which presented murders as puzzles to be solved neatly and quickly for the amusement of complacent couch potatoes. When the network forced Lynch to solve his own puzzle, he blamed the audience and...well, there's a lot more.

Ribblett's video, which has 3.3 million views, became a flash point among longtime fans. Some were grateful to him for shedding light on the show's enduring riddles. Others felt he had violated the spirit of the enterprise. "The way I like to evaluate media is: What was the original guy saying, even though David Lynch would say that that's not the way he wants you to see it," Ribblett admits. "He, and pretty much the entire fan base, will tell you it's up to the viewer. And I don't disagree. It's just that my video is about what David Lynch was bringing to it."

To Scott Ryan, publisher of the *Blue Rose* fanzine and author of several books about *Twin Peaks,* Ribblett's video was a classic example of "Lynchsplaining." "If someone says, 'I'm going to tell you what *Twin Peaks* is about,' get up and go. That's your signal. This person doesn't get it. And they're actually afraid of it." Then again, Ryan acknowledged, Ribblett's video was orders of magnitude more successful than any of *his* videos.

Ribblett spent two years on his explainer video. John Thorne spent *four* writing *Ominous Whoosh: A Wandering Mind Returns to* Twin Peaks. The coeditor of *Wrapped in Plastic,* an influential fanzine published from 1992 to 2005, he argues that virtually all of *The Return* is filtered through Cooper's mind. Knowing the show's production history, however, Thorne approached the exercise with deep humility. "You had powerful creators sometimes working in sync and sometimes working at odds," he says, "and the work developed in a way that could never have been planned."

The average fan spinning theories on Reddit tends to ignore Frost completely and ascribe omniscient intentionality to Lynch. But as Harley Peyton points out, Lynch's real genius was to go with the flow in interesting ways. "I remember there was an autopsy scene" in the pilot, "and the lights started flickering on the set. Now usually that's a two-hour delay while someone thinks, What the hell is going on with the lights? But David was like, 'No, no, this is neat. Let's do this.' It's a lot of fun, but it's also brilliant."

"THE TRUTH IS HARD TO GET AT"

THE ETERNAL EFFORT to discern a grand design within *Twin Peaks* meets its greatest obstacle in the wildly uneven second season. Careerism, clashing egos, network politics, audience pushback, and the relentless demands of weekly TV production all took their toll. After a glorious 17-episode run—culminating in the resolution of the Laura Palmer mystery and the death of her father, Leland—the show went off the rails for the better part of 12 episodes, only to be rescued at the last moment when Lynch himself, back in the director's chair, freestyled much of the finale. Most of it is set in the Red Room, a liminal space between our reality and the evil realm known as the Black Lodge.

Here are some of the things that went wrong for that cursed stretch of episodes. ABC, citing the audience's mounting impatience, insisted on a solution to the Laura Palmer mystery—now, not later. Annoyed by its lack of ownership and spooked by the sheer weirdness of the show, the network also started moving *Twin Peaks* around the schedule, confusing those in the audience who still cared. MacLachlan, who was dating Lara Flynn Boyle at the time and charting a career as a leading man, nixed his character's intended romance with Sherilyn Fenn's character, Audrey Horne, and asked for a wardrobe change so he wouldn't be typecast as a black-suited G-man. The writers, struggling to regain narrative traction amid all these unexpected swerves, spitballed some unconvincing characters and storylines. And Frost, who had always wanted to try his hand at directing, went off to shoot his feature debut in New Orleans.

Here is something that did *not* happen during that stretch, even though Lynch seemed happy to let the fans think it did: David Lynch leaving to shoot *Wild at Heart.* That happened during the first season. According to Frost, Peyton, and a third writer, Robert Engels, Lynch was there for the whole second season. He signed off on everything.

Later, Lynch disavowed everything between the solving of Laura's murder and the season-two finale. And when Chris Rodley, the editor of the 1997 book *Lynch on Lynch,* gave him an out, he took it:

> *Isn't it true that you were less involved in the second series, because you were off making* Wild at Heart*?*

> Right. That started...in the second season I was, you know, removed from it. Although I loved the idea of a continuing story, those stories have to be written, and every week you have to do another show, and pretty soon it catches up with you and you find you don't have enough time to get down in there and do what you're supposed to do. And it becomes something you don't really want to do.

This is a fascinating exchange and not a straightforward one. As Lynch says elsewhere in the book, "You only remember the things you want to remember. The truth is hard to get at." Maybe Lynch forgot which season was underway when he filmed *Wild at Heart.* Maybe not. But I think there's an honesty to his acknowledgment that he didn't have "enough time to get down in there." He was "removed from it." And it became something he really didn't want to do. He couldn't work the way he wanted to at the pace of network TV. Frost knew how to do that. Lynch did not. He let the show get away from him.

It's a mistake he would not repeat.

CITIZENS OPPOSING THE OFFING OF PEAKS

IN FEBRUARY 1991, two thirds of the way through season two, ABC said it was putting the show on indefinite hiatus, a decision that left the remaining episodes in limbo. In Brad Dukes's *Reflections: An Oral History of* Twin Peaks, a former ABC executive named Philip Segal says the network was "very close" to pulling the plug.

A 29-year-old Republican political operative named Michael Caputo decided he wasn't going to let that happen. Caputo had learned the dark arts of political

skulduggery from Roger Stone, for whom he once worked as a driver, and during the Reagan administration was part of Oliver North's propaganda operation in Central America. In 2020 Donald Trump would appoint him as the chief spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services, where he set about informing the CDC and other departments that their presentations of scientific data pertaining to COVID-19 amounted to "sedition."

I know. And yet, Caputo was hard to put into a box. Though a proud member of the dirty-tricks branch of the Republican Party, he also saw the Grateful Dead 427 times. And from the first time he saw *Twin Peaks,* he adored it. He and a roommate hosted weekly viewing parties at their house in Washington, DC. "People from all different walks of life would come to our house and watch *Twin Peaks* once a week: liberals, conservatives, political types, waiters, bartenders," Caputo says.

After ABC announced the indefinite hiatus, Caputo found himself bitching about the decision with a group of fellow Deadheads outside a bar called 15 Minutes. "I remember this guy taking a big drag off the joint and saying, 'Well, you're such a freaking political guy. Why don't you stop them? If you can elect somebody president of the United States, you can stop somebody from canceling a TV show.'"

The guy was right, Caputo decided. He and a friend named Keith Poston cofounded a pressure group called COOP—Citizens Opposing the Offing of Peaks—and "ran it like a political campaign," he says. After they got a little press, Caputo received a call from Lynch. Working together, they set up a series of simultaneous events around the country. Cast members were dispatched to various cities for in-person appearances, and Lynch addressed them all via satellite.

Poston served as the public face of COOP. Caputo had taken a job as director of media services for George H.W. Bush's reelection campaign and didn't want the Bush operation to know about the *Twin Peaks* operation, and vice versa. "Somehow, Lynch got wind that I was working for President Bush, and he called me at home," Caputo recalls. "He said, 'I want you to know that I'm a Bush guy, and you don't have to hide that around my team.' And I said, 'Well, I'm kind of hiding it because of *my* team.'"

COOP's target was Robert Iger, then the head of entertainment at ABC. The hiatus had been his call. "I got word from inside the network that Iger immediately regretted the decision, so I knew that if we were at least kind, we probably wouldn't piss him off." Working in the snail mail era, Caputo and Poston collected thousands of addresses. "In the final mailer we sent, we encouraged everyone to send logs" to Iger's office. Eventually, the network relented and agreed to air the six remaining episodes. The fans had won. But the writing for *Twin Peaks* was on the wall, and it was not renewed for a third season.

A few years after the show was canceled, the US government sent Caputo to Russia to support Boris Yeltsin's post-Soviet government. "*Twin Peaks* had just arrived in Russia, and Moscow was in the thrall of the show, just like America had been," says Caputo. "When I was first introduced to Boris Yeltsin, the person introducing me to him said, 'Michael Caputo, George Bush, Ronald Reagan, blah blah blah,' all in Russian. And he's nodding at me. And then I heard the guy say 'Twin Peaks' and Boris Yeltsin's eyes lit up. I can tell you, I dined out more on *Twin Peaks* in Russia than I ever did in America."

Inside ABC, meanwhile, the sting of *Twin Peaks*' commercial failure lingered long after the show had cemented its cultural standing. When they were pitching the network on *Lost,* with its supernatural puzzle box qualities, Lindelof says he and cocreator JJ Abrams were told, "Just don't pull a *Twin Peaks* on us." According to Lindelof, Abrams replied, "'We should be so lucky.' Maybe from a network perspective, it was not successful. But for us, it's on Rushmore."

"I WAS IN LOVE WITH THE CHARACTER"

THE COMMUNITY OF fans still arguing online about *Twin Peaks* reminds Lindelof of the rabbis in the Torah arguing over the proper interpretation of scripture. "It's the mystery that makes it endure," he says of the show. But as I got offline and started meeting fans, I began to realize that many are drawn in not by the postmodern enigmas but by the complex character at the center of the story.

Laura Palmer was there right from the start. "All of a sudden, Mark and I had this image of a body washing up on the shore of a lake," Lynch said of one of their first writing sessions.

The notion had been percolating in Frost's mind for a long time before that. When he was in eighth grade, a family friend named Susan Freschi, age 14, was beaten to death by a man in Vancouver. She was found naked, her hands bound behind her back. When her parents went to identify the body, they left their son with Frost's family for a few days. The boy knew nothing of his sister's fate, and Frost's parents asked him not to breathe a word. "That left a mark," Frost says.

And there was something else from his childhood that haunted him. His grandmother told him about a murder that took place near her home in upstate New York. A dead girl's body washed ashore on Big Bowman Pond, not far from a sawmill. Frost thought this might be a ghost story, but it was all too real. Hazel Drew lived a double life. Neighbors were shocked to find that she'd been having liaisons with wealthy men. "That was the other part, mythologically speaking, of where Laura Palmer came from," Frost says.

Laura was always going to set the plot in motion, but no one expected her character to get much screen time. Sheryl Lee was cast in part because she lived in Seattle, close to the shooting location. "Since this girl had no lines and was just dead, we weren't gonna hire someone from LA and put them up," said Lynch, who zeroed in on Lee based on a headshot. "But no one—not Mark, me, anyone—had any idea that she could act, or that she was going to be so powerful just being dead. Or how important that small decision was."

One of the key clues in the pilot is a camcorder video of Laura and her friend Donna Hayward frolicking on a hill while someone—the killer?—captures them on camera. Lynch was so taken by Lee's performance in that short sequence that he began finding more ways to use her, first in a dream sequence set in the Red Room, then in a new role as Laura's lookalike cousin, Maddy Ferguson. (*Twin Peaks,* as the name suggests, is jam-packed with doppelgängers.)

After ABC canceled the series, Lynch—without Frost—moved quickly to shoot a movie set in the *Twin Peaks* universe. Defying the wishes and expectations of just about everyone except himself and his cowriter, Engels, he decided not to carry the story forward but instead to go back and tell the story of Laura Palmer's final days from beginning to end. Her contradictions—the "good girl" who

delivers Meals on Wheels and tutors a special-needs child, the "bad girl" who sleeps with men for money and helps her boyfriend deal cocaine—would get a full airing. "I was in love with the character of Laura Palmer: radiant on the surface but dying inside," Lynch told Rodley. "I wanted to see her live, move, and talk."

Critics hated *Fire Walk With Me.* It was booed at Cannes and trashed upon its release in the summer of 1992. But the film held up over time, and Lynch never turned on it. "I really like the film," he said in 1997. "It's as free and as experimental as it could be within the dictates it had to follow."

With its unflinching depiction of incestuous abuse, *Fire Walk With Me* became a touchstone for fans who identify with Laura Palmer. In her book *Laura's Ghost: Women Speak About* Twin Peaks, author Courtenay Stallings says it "revealed both the physical and spiritual trauma of childhood sexual abuse. The realism of Laura's abuse continues to resonate with many, including survivors."

"WE HEAR YOU'VE BEEN TALKING TO THE NEIGHBORS"

MARY REBER HAD no idea the house she had her eye on was Laura Palmer's. The seller probably didn't want to scare people off. The white two-story Dutch Colonial overlooking the Puget Sound was a magnet for fans who see their own pain in the character of Laura.

Inside, the house is eerily unchanged from how it looked when the pilot was shot here in 1989. You can stand at the bottom of the stairs and almost see Grace Zabriskie, as Sarah Palmer, fly into a panic over her daughter's disappearance. The ceiling fan, a symbol of evil stirring to life, is still there. Reber says she isn't afraid of it anymore. She's made her peace with the human fans too. In fact, she welcomes them, within reason. "I'm an empath, and early on I let people take advantage of me," she says. "So now I'm an empath with boundaries."

In 2014, two months after she moved in, Reber came back from a shopping trip to find a note on the front door saying that a Hollywood production was interested in using it for a shoot. "This was all so shrouded in secrecy, so I didn't know it was David Lynch, but I hoped it was." A location scout stopped by, then said the director would be paying a visit. "I looked through the window when he came up the steps and there was that infamous gray hair."

Lynch came once in January, then again in the spring. Reber is not the type to get starstruck, and she thinks he liked that about her. At one point during his second visit, he said, "Mary, are you an actor?" She said no. He said, "Have you ever done any acting?" She said no. Undeterred, he said, "Would you like to play a small part in this production?" This time she said yes. And that's how she found herself acting in the finale of *Twin Peaks: The Return.*

The script arrived in September, a month before the shoot. Like all the actors, she was heavily NDA'd and received only the pages of the scene she was in. In it, she answers the door of her own house as MacLachlan and Lee, playing characters who aren't exactly Cooper and Palmer, arrive in search of Laura's mother, Sarah. "It's a really, really eerie scene," says MacLachlan. "Even shooting it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up."

Before shooting the scene, which sets up the jarring final moment of the entire series, Reber sat down with Lynch, MacLachlan, and Lee for a rehearsal. MacLachlan said his line, asking for Sarah Palmer, and Reber replied, "Who?" Lynch stopped her. "Mary, I want you to wait 10 seconds before answering him." She tried again, but she was still too fast. He said he would tap his leg when it was time. "When people come here, sometimes I'll look at them for 10 seconds and ask them what that does to them," she says. "It's unnerving!"

Reber and her then husband signed an NDA that wouldn't expire until several years after *The Return* aired. At one point, her husband got a phone call from Sabrina Sutherland, Lynch's longtime producer. "David and I are not happy with you," Sutherland said. "We hear you've been talking to the neighbors."

Today, released from her obligations, Reber offers tours on her website, visitpalmerhouse.com. She's happy to show people around, reminisce about the shoot, and, more often than not, listen to the stories of abuse, trauma, and grief that come pouring out. Reber says she has experienced abuse herself. She also lost her son three years ago. She is no stranger to the complicated emotions that her visitors bring to these encounters.

There's a paradox at the center of the Laura Palmer tragedy. She dies—and yet she inspires others to carry on. In *The Return* her character takes on mythical dimensions, becoming a Christlike messiah figure who sacrifices herself to destroy a larger evil. But I think the people who come to this house, who cry with Reber, take a simpler view of the character. As Laura Kelly wrote in Screen Rant, "Frost and Lynch's creation has such enduring significance because it squashed the idea of the perfect victim."

Lee rarely speaks to journalists, but her friend the writer Scott Ryan says she expects to have intense encounters with fans and takes her responsibility to them seriously. "You see the woman in line coming up. Sheryl knows it's coming. You know it's coming. They're gonna go over to the corner, and Sheryl just takes that all in," Ryan says. "She has helped so many people. To me, that's the whole heart of *Twin Peaks,* what Laura Palmer represents to these women, and probably some men, who have been sexually abused."

"PURE DAVID"

FIRE WALK WITH ME'S commercial failure "put a stake in the heart of *Twin Peaks* as far as I could tell," Frost later said. But then, something funny happened. Instead of fading into oblivion, the show continued to fascinate old fans and mint new ones. Josh Eisenstadt is a filmmaker and longtime fan who has formed friendships with many members of the cast based in part on his photographic memory of every detail of the show. He remembers a surge of visitors to the annual *Twin Peaks* Festival in Snoqualmie around 2011, when the series first came to Netflix.

That's around the time when Frost reached out to Lynch with an idea for how to move the story forward. They began writing together, first in person and then over Skype after Frost moved to Ojai. When they had the first two hours written, they pitched it to Showtime. The name the network gave the new series, *Twin Peaks: The Return,* would prove ironic. Those longing to revisit the folksy, quirky world of the original series were in for a jolt.

When Showtime proposed a budget Lynch found inadequate, he quit. The network's president, David Nevins, had to step in to save the deal. Working in

NDA-enforced secrecy, Lynch directed the entire 18-episode run as if it were a single feature film. "Lynch never showed me a cut," Frost told author David Bushman. "David and Mark wrote the scripts, but it was really David's...everything," MacLachlan says. "He shot every single frame of it."

If the original series exposed the moral rot lurking beneath a veneer of small-town respectability, *The Return* revealed a society shredded by human and inhuman forces. As the action jumps from Vegas to New York to South Dakota, we meet gangsters, hit men, loan sharks, and crooked prison wardens. Twin Peaks itself is overrun by a mysterious drug called sparkle coming across the border from Canada. The younger generation is not so much adrift as it is violently hurtling toward catastrophe. Is this the grim vision of a "Bush guy" alarmed by rising crime and the influx of drugs across our borders, or that of an FDR liberal appalled by the systematic depredations of late-stage capitalism? Why not both?

For some fans, *The Return* was disappointing. Tonally, the balance was much darker than the original, more Lynchian than Frostian. And it moved at a pace that tested the patience of even die-hard fans. Cooper doesn't even properly reappear until Part 16.

The singer Chrystabell, who made music with Lynch for many years, played Tammy Preston, a young FBI agent who works closely with Gordon Cole. She bore the brunt of fan frustration with the show's direction. "Tammy was polarizing," she says, and became a stand-in for "characters they didn't care about because they wanted to see what was happening to all the characters they love." The response stung, but over time she came to terms with it. "Ultimately what brought me comfort was realizing, OK, I am an intrinsic aspect of this offering that was pure David. It was the ride of a lifetime and I wouldn't change anything. Would I have taken a couple of acting classes since it was my first gig? Maybe. But at the same time, David told me not to do that because he wanted me just as I was."

The critical response to *The Return*, meanwhile, was glowing. *Sight & Sound* magazine named it the second best "film" of 2017, after *Get Out*. Before long, most fans embraced it and duly set about trying to decode its mysteries.

According to Peyton, Frost intended to end *The Return* with the penultimate episode, in which Cooper has a climactic showdown with Bob and then goes back in time to prevent Laura Palmer's murder. "That episode is sort of sweetly nostalgic, in a way that actually made me tearful," Peyton says. The finale itself, which Peyton describes as "the most horrifying scream into the blackest of voids," was all Lynch. Peyton likens it to the Beatles' later albums, where Paul would get a song, then John would get one. "Season three was their White Album," he says. When I ask Frost to confirm this, he says, "Well, I would say that we both got our ending, and they actually work hand in hand. And I mean, both hours are pretty damn good television."

Not that Frost has seen them lately. "Honestly, I don't sit around watching my own work over and over again," he says. "I hope that's a good sign." Chrystabell, meanwhile, says she watched *The Return* with Lynch *three times*. "What I can say is that by the third time we watched it together, it made perfect sense. I was like, 'Oh, this is so straightforward.' Sometimes I feel like I just had to...not get out of my head but get into my heart."

"FINDING LOVE IN HELL"

ONE MORNING IN January, Frost awoke at 2:30, unable to breathe. "I didn't have a cold. I didn't have chest congestion. There was no smoke," he remembers. The fires consuming LA were two hours away from his home in Ojai. At 3 a.m. he drove to his beach house in Ventura and took a walk by the water. "The sea air is really good for your lungs, and I started to feel better," he remembers. "I finally came in and fell asleep on the sofa at like 4:30, 5 in the morning." Three hours later, Peyton called him with the news that Lynch had died.

Later, Frost pieced together an unnerving timeline. Lynch, he heard, had awakened early that same morning. "He went to meditate, and they found him a few hours later. And he was gone," says Frost. "I'm just giving you the facts. I can't extrapolate anything larger than that out of it, but we were connected in some way."

"If he was truly in the middle of a meditation, maybe there's some comfort in that," says MacLachlan. "Maybe somehow, he was able to transcend."

Looking back, I see now that I was drawn back into *Twin Peaks* at a time when it felt like the real world was falling off its axis. Biden was clearly no match for Trump. The institutions that shaped my life—the media, Hollywood, America itself—were collapsing. I needed an escape, but not to a phony world where everything is awesome. In *Twin Peaks* I found a warm bath—of cyanide. A refuge where good and evil are, at best, evenly matched.

But I also found a warped virtual small town where people like me—a little arty, a little alienated—were accepted without judgment. There's a cliché of bad TV called the Worthless Treasure Twist trope. Something the audience thinks will be a valuable discovery turns out to be... nothing. You'll see it referenced with the one-liner "Maybe the real treasure was the friends we made along the way." As I reported this story, I started repeating that line to myself like some goofball mantra.

In March, a few days before the Oscars, I sat in a booth at Bob's Big Boy in Burbank and split a slice of cherry pie with Josh Eisenstadt and Adele Jones, who played Lieutenant Cynthia Knox in *The Return*. In the '80s, legend has it, Lynch wrote *Blue Velvet* on napkins at the now defunct Bob's Big Boy in Beverly Hills. After he died, this location became the site of a spontaneous fan memorial. Eisenstadt, as I've mentioned, is a fan. But he and Jones both belong to a group chat called Twin Peaks Family Forever, which blew up with messages of love and support from the likes of Amick and Sutherland as news of Lynch's death spread. On January 20, which would have been Lynch's 79th birthday, Jones and Eisenstadt met up here with friends from the cast and crew. After raising a chocolate shake to Lynch's memory, they visited the memorial by the mascot out front. Jones added a doughnut to the growing collection of blue roses, Cokes, and packs of American Spirits.

"David didn't want to work with you if you were a jackass," Scott Ryan says. "It's why everyone is heartbroken that he's dead. David Lynch could see something in the people he cast, and the cast members see it in the fans as well. There's a connection, and it's not mystical. It's humanity."

A few weeks into the new year, that connection felt like a lifeline. "The fires here, losing David, Trump getting into office again—2025 feels very nightmarish," says Eisenstadt. "But in a very Lynchian way, there's been this closeness with the people in my life that feels comforting and safe. David always said that finding love in hell is the theme of all of his films." ■